A Brahmin Woman

Revenge Herself

LALITAMBIKA ANTARJANAM

Lalitambika Antarjanam was born in 1909 in the Kottarakara district of southern Kerala of literary parents who both wrote poetry. She herself had little formal education. In 1927 she was married to Narayanan Nambudiri. She was an active participant in the Indian National Congress and was later associated with the Kerala Marxist Party. All through her life she was a political activist and social reformer. Her published works consist of nine collections of short stories, six collections of poems, two books for children, and a novel, *Agnisakshi* (1980), which won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for the best literary work of the year. She died in 1987.

Lalitambika's short story "Revenge Herself," published in the Malayalam journal *Mathrubhumi* in 1938 and here translated by Vasanti Sankaranarayanan, is based on an actual event. Nambudiri Brahmin women (belonging to the caste represented by the story's protagonist, Tatri) were also known as Antarjanam—literally meaning "the secluded ones," on account of being more or less confined to the inner courtyard and verandah. The Nambudiris—unlike the Nayars and some other castes of Kerala, which were matrilineal—maintained a patrilineal form of family organization. A Nambudiri woman had no control or rights over her own sexuality; a Nayar woman—within certain limits, mainly of caste—did. A Nayar woman could have relationships with visiting husbands that could be begun and ended without formality. But a different ideal was required of a Nambudiri woman, as an Antarjanam.

In "Revenge Herself," Lalitambika describes the lifestyle of Tatri, a young Nambudiri woman in the late nineteenth century. She made ritual garlands out of *karuka*, or herbal grass, every day; sang songs in praise of Siva and Parvati to accompany the ritual folk dances of the Tiruvadira Festival (dedicated to Madan..., god of erotic love); and recited the story of Seelavati, who ordered the sun not to rise so that she might save her dying husband. Tatri, like other Nambudiri women, was brought up to believe that her husband would be her *pratyaksha deivam*, visible god; her *pati devata*, husband god. A good woman was a *pati vrata*, her husband's devotee. Lalitambika's novel *Agnisakshi* also refers to Parasurama, one of the ten incarnations of the Lord Vishnu, who according to legend threw his axe into the sea and raised a piece of land that later came to be known as Kerala.

REVENGE HERSELF

Midnight. I sat alone in my study. Sleep beckoned me with compassion, caressing my work-weary body and soul. But if I should put away my writing materials, there would be no returning until the next day—to the same hour, the same weariness. Silence all around, broken only by the occasional chatter of the married mice in the attic, or the snoring of the sleeping children in the next room. From the solitary lamp on the table a pale light was cast, somehow terrifying against the dense darkness outside. Somewhere owls hooted in warning. I am a coward by nature, let me admit it. I was more so that night, in those eerie surroundings.

I shut the window and bolted it, adjusted the wicks of the oil lamp, checked on the children to see if they were awake, came back and sat in my usual place. I had to write. But what should I write about? Where to begin? The problem overwhelmed me. It is not easy to write a story, particularly for a woman in my position. I want to write out of my convictions, but I fear to hazard my name, my status. When my stories mirror the reality of society, I am open to the criticism of all kinds of people. When they abuse me, how should I retaliate? I dare not even approach the question of religious customs. And yet in spite of all these scruples, whom will I displease this time? Which literary movement will I offend?

I threw my pen down in disgust, leaned back in the chair and shut my eyes. Many possible characters seemed to walk by: seen, unseen, alive, dead, women and men: suffering souls, voiceless, but with thunder and lightning in their hearts. Were they commanding me to record their lives? I was frightened, but exhilarated too.

Suddenly I heard the sound of approaching footsteps. What was this? I shivered and sat up. Had I forgotten to close the door and bolt it? I hadn't heard the sound of the door being opened. It was midnight, the time when spirits walk. And though I am not naturally superstitious, I was afraid, I felt faint, my eyes closed. The footsteps seemed to come nearer and nearer, yet I could not move.

Minutes ticked by. Five minutes? An hour? I don't know. After some time I heard a woman's voice nearby, speaking to me softly but firmly: "Are you asleep? Or are you just scared?"

I did not stir. Or rather, I did not have the courage to stir. The voice continued in a slightly sarcastic tone: "You claim to be a writer, and yet you are afraid. I

thought that experienced writers were accustomed to observing horror and tragedy without so much as batting an eyelid."

My curiosity to see this person who knew this much about me overcame my fear. I opened my eyes. Before me, as though from a dream, stood a woman, neither young nor old; ageless. Her expression seemed a mixture of sorrow, bitterness, hatred, and despair. Her eyes seemed to burn with the intensity of revenge. I thought she was a figure from the pages of recent history—known but forgotten.

She continued authoritatively, yet with some kindness too. "Mine is not a social visit. I thought you were in a dilemma, floundering without a theme for a story. I can offer you an excellent one: shelved and rotting, waiting to be written. With your permission—if you are not afraid..."

By this time I had pulled myself together somewhat.

"Yes," I said, "I am scared. Of this night. Of all that is happening now. Who are you? How did you manage to come here? Weren't the doors closed?"

"Who am I?" She laughed aloud. "So you would like to know who I am. You want to know whether I am human being or devil, ghost or evil spirit. You have courage."

Her laughter had the sound of a wild river that had burst its dam. Wave upon wave of that unearthly laughter filled the room, echoing, reverberating. By this time I was prepared.

"I admit I am a coward. But tell me who you are. Without knowing that how can I proceed? As human beings we need to know—even about the remotest stars—their names and station."

"As human beings? I would rather you didn't call me one," she cut in angrily. "Once upon a time, I was proud to carry that name, and I struggled hard not to dishonor it. Now I no longer wish to be known as a human being, particularly a woman. One lesson I have learnt, and perhaps I have taught it too: the human condition is one of cruel betrayal and suffering."

"Perhaps," I agreed. "But isn't suffering and pain the special gift granted to humankind—the golden chain that links human and divine?"

She dismissed the notion summarily.

"Suffering, a golden chain? What absolute nonsense! Just tell me one thing. As a means of bondage, is gold any different from iron? At least one knows

where one is with iron. Gold hides behind its seductive facade. Iswara! That, after all, is the difference between devil and man too."

By now, her face, charged with hatred, had taken on an inhuman aspect, though I could not quite understand how the change had come about. Sorrow, hatred, pride, and revenge seemed to flit across it, making it extraordinarily vivid, strangely attractive. I wondered what it was that she had endured in her past life.

"Are you waiting to hear my story?" she asked after a pause. "Well, it is my intention to tell you. It is an old story, of true events that happened half a century ago. At that time it turned history on its head. You weren't even born then. Neither were these new-fangled social reformist organizations with their tall claims nor their leaders around then. Few characters from my story are alive now. But the echoes of those events have not quite died... Did you ever hear of Tatri of—?"

I shivered. So this was she. Whose name our mothers had prohibited us from speaking. A name which to us had become obscene. I was speechless.

She saw my hesitation. Sadly she said, "O yes, which Nambudiri woman hasn't heard of Tatri, 'fallen object,' 'tainted goods'? Though none of you will so much as admit to that knowledge. But child, can you now try and understand why that hated one gave up her life?"

"To begin with, she was as innocent as any one of you. She too once made *karuka* garlands. She too prayed like you, raptly clasping her black string. She fasted on all auspicious days. She was innocent, she had neither looked upon a man nor spoken with him. Grandmothers used to uphold Tatri as a model of propriety to all the young girls who come of age.

"But you know that all those rituals are, after all, charades. You know that by the time we are seventeen or eighteen we are shrewd enough to control our most secret thoughts. On moonlit nights we sit in the inner verandah reciting prayers, our sighs suppressed. We sing 'Parvati Swayamvaram' and 'Mangala Atira' and dance, the catch in our voices unheard. And all the time we wait, with bated breath, for the men's voices in the outer verandah. We offer austere leaves of *kavalam* in strict prayer, while our hearts are filled with the sensuous fragrance of mango blooms. And so we wait... days, months, even years... At last one day our mothers come with henna and silver ring. And our hands are given into the hands of a man—old or young, invalid or lecher. That is our destiny. That is our entire life.

"Mine was a lucky fate, or so people said in those days. He was in his prime, it was his first marriage, he had sufficient means. So I began my marriage with no worries. I soon found he was a man with aggressive sexual needs. I learnt in time to meet those demands, to please him in his taste for sex with the same attention and care that I gave to his taste for food. After all, one's husband is considered the *pratyaksha deivam*, the "seen" God. And it was to please that God that I learnt the art of the prostitute. If it were not for that, dear sister, I too—like so many women of our community—would have remained a mere wife, a neglected and ignored wife. Perhaps, too, none of the wretched consequences would have followed. On the other hand, it might be that in learning to serve him I unleashed my own instinctual being. I don't know. But I swear to you that at that time he alone was at the center of my life.

"So it was that when he started drifting away from me, I was desolate. Often he didn't come home at night. I used to think, at first, that he was at a festival or a private feast. Perhaps he was at the *variyam* or was needed at the palace. I would cry and sulk on the rare occasions when I saw him. There was no one else to share my grief.

"He laughed in response to my heartbroken complaints. A man, he said, is as free as a bird. His life should be one of enjoyment. Surely a man cannot be expected to waste away his entire youth married to one woman, and that a Nambudiri wife.

"Sometimes I was filled with anger and bitterness. Sometimes I even wished to put an end to my life. I often cursed my lot as a Nambudiri woman, thinking, if only I belonged to any other caste of Kerala, one which would have given me the right to reply, to match his male arrogance with my freedom.

"But no. Each month, upon the recurrence of his birth star, I bathed and prayed that he should have a long life, making offerings of tumba flower garlands and *nevil-lakku* lit with ghee. When I came of age I had prayed to be granted a good husband; now I prayed that I should be granted my husband's love.

"The steward of our estate was a kind man who made sure I had plenty to eat. But what about one's inner hunger, that other greed? Once kindled it is not easily quenched. It flows like molten lava, like fire through the very lifeblood. He, my husband, knew this too. But he was a man and I a woman. A woman born in a cursed society.

"I too would have suffered in silence like all those other Nambudiri women except for what happened unexpectedly. One night he came home with a new wife. They were to sleep that night in the very bedroom I had shared with him. I could bring myself to serve food to this woman, but to be actually asked to prepare their nuptial bed! Yes, I had chanted the 'Seelavati charitram' again and again... But an Antarjanam is a human being too... I cursed her aloud. In my grief and outrage, I called her a whore. In that instant I saw him turn into a devil. He flung my words back at me: 'I know perfectly well she is a whore—I love her for what she is. If you could be like her, I might like you better.'

"I could bear the physical violence, but those words were a far worse assault. I was numb with the horror of it. A *pati vrata*, a woman of honor to be as much as told by her husband, "If you want me to love you, be a prostitute!" For a blinding moment, I was overcome by a furious thirst *for* revenge. Somehow I held myself together. But I knew I had had enough. I could not stay in that place a moment longer.

"I did not speak to him again. I withdrew into myself. Desolate and grief-stricken, yearning for consolation, I returned to my own home. There followed days without love, uneventful days. There were no rays of light in the tunnel. All Nambudiri houses are dark prisons, after all. Is one any better than another? My father had died, but his five wives were still alive. My brother was looking for a bride to replace his fourth wife who was now dead. My two widowed sisters were there too. The third one, driven insane because of the ill-treatment she had received from her husband, wandered about aimlessly. Two younger sisters, now grown up, were unmarried—a burden to the house and a grief to my mother. When I joined this lot, it was exactly like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. Living in such a bleak, claustrophobic world, who could be blamed for seeking some comfort? I was young, healthy, egoistic. I thought I was more beautiful than any of my husband's mistresses. In those days, when I combed my hair, freshened my face, and glanced covertly through the windows, all I wanted was a glimpse of the outside world. I had an innocent desire to be seen and admired. There were some who caught those glances and smiled at me. I smiled in return. And that was all. Those aristocratic Nambudiris who were attracted to me knew well enough the consequences I would suffer for even this. As for themselves, they would have been ready for any kind of liaison, provided it was discreet.

"Meaningful glances. Hushed whispers. Gossip and scandal. The inmates of the inner rooms turned out to be fifth columnists. My mother never lost an opportunity to curse me: 'You sinner, born to be the ruin of your family's reputation. I wish I had never carried you in my womb.'

"And one day my sister-in-law was peremptory with her order: 'Don't step into the kitchen.'

"I still cannot understand why I was punished so. I hadn't so much as touched a man other than my husband. I hadn't the boldness to nurture such a desire. There had been a few glances through the window. A few men had been attracted. Was that my fault? But the world was never concerned with reason or logic. The innuendos continued till they numbed my heart. Terror at the thought of dishonor threw me off balance, pushed me to the verge of the very abyss I dreaded. I was long past suffering. In all directions there was only darkness. It was as though through whirling coils of dark smoke my enemies waited, ready to strike, like snakes. To survive that final struggle I had to be a snake too. At last I gave way to those long quiescent storms of anger and revenge.

"If I should tell you what I decided to do, you would be appalled. But please remember, my sister, that it was done for you too, and for all Nambudiri women. As a matter of pride. As a show of strength. I enjoyed the humiliation of those men, for there never was any value attached to our own tears. Yet, after all, in the end I gained nothing, for even you women hated me, dreaded me more than the devil. Years have passed, but even to you of a modern time Tatri is no more than a fallen woman."

As she spoke, her eyes filled with tears, and overcome with grief she laid her head upon the table. I watched her in silence, wondering what sort of future a woman such as she could have expected. If her life had been shattered and strewn around the wilderness like pieces of a broken bottle then was it her fault or that of society's? There could have been only two alternatives for her: madness or prostitution. Both tragic.

After a moment she sat up, her eyes dry once more and aflame with intensity. "No, child," she said, "I shall not cry again. That was a momentary weakness." She resumed her story. "Nothing could shock me any more—neither the waves breaking the bounds of the sea, nor even the skies falling down. Life and death had all become the same. Yes, I made my decision. I thought that since I had chosen my destiny, it should also be an act of revenge on behalf of my mothers and sisters. If I should be victimized, it

should not be on false grounds. If I should be made an outcast, it should not be for being innocent. Women, too, I thought, can willingly choose the path of debasement. And if I should choose to fall, I would bring down with me several cruel men who were the means of that fall. I would see to it that in the clear light of justice many more men than I should deserve excommunication.

"On a certain night a new courtesan appeared on the festival grounds and temple precincts. She was beautiful and witty. Her modesty attracted men even more than her beauty. Princes, courtiers, and Nambudiris, all sought her company. At first she kept them all at arm's length, saying she was a married woman with a husband who was still alive. She withheld a crucial detail about herself, however—the community to which she belonged. They brushed aside her pleas to be left alone. They argued that in Kerala, the land of Parasurama, a woman was allowed as many husbands as she chose. The only women who were outside this rule were the Nambudiris. The rest, they said, were free to enjoy their pleasure. Oh, these men who seem so honorable, so saintly! Men who expect unquestioning faithfulness from their own wives, but who are quite willing to ruin another's!

"So many men were attracted to me. So different from the ostracism of the inner rooms. I melted, I was moved. I could not have enough of their adulation.

"The new courtesan grew famous. Those who came to her went away happy. From each of them, in return for their pleasure, she received—or took—gifts and mementos. And so, gradually and deliberately, she gained possession of the honor of many men who claimed to be pillars of our society.

"There was one man who was yet to come. There was one man for whom she waited and watched. She knew he would not fail to come, once he had heard of this true pleasure seeker. We had not seen each other for five years. But I recognized him the moment I met him at my usual rendezvous near the temple. He, however, did not know me. How could he see in this proud and famous woman his old Antarjanam?

"I shall not forget that night. For that night I had debased myself; for that night I had lived and waited. From the moment he had last spoken, this idea had rankled, then seeded and grown in my mind. If a woman should go to the lengths of be- coming a prostitute in order to please her husband, can she be called a pati vrata? For if that were so, I too was one; a veritable

'Seelavati.' Through my corruption I could please him, and yes, he was pleased.

"Just before he left me, he said, 'In all my life, I have never met a woman so beautiful and so clever. I wish I could live with you always.'

"At the very moment that he slipped the ring—once again—on my finger, I asked him, 'Are you sure you have never before met one like me?'

"Holding his sacred thread with both hands, he said, 'No, I swear by my Brahmasvam. No. I have never before met a woman of your wit and intelligence.'

"I smiled with triumph. I raised my voice very slightly and said, 'That's false. Think of your wife. Was she any worse than I?'

"In the hesitant light of that pale dawn he looked at me once again. A strangled ry escaped him. 'O my God, my Lord Vadakkunatha, it is Tatri. Tatri.' And he fled from my sight, disappearing immediately.

"That's all I need to tell you. You know very well all that happened afterwards. As an Antarjanam I was brought to trial for defilement, and under threat of losing caste. It was a trial that shook the whole of Kerala. As it got under way, they were all terrified—yes, princes and Nambudiris too—that their names would be spoken by the prostitute. Then some went into hiding. Others frantically made offerings to the gods. Each hoped desperately she had forgotten him.

"I had more than names, I had proofs; a golden ring with a name engraved upon it, a golden girdle, a gold-bordered veshti. And so, sixty-five men, priests among them, were brought to trial. I could have been the means of excommunicating sixty thousand men, not merely sixty-five. Any woman who was beautiful enough and clever enough could have done the same, such were the decadent landlords and Nambudiris of those days. I could have insisted on continuing the inquiry. But no. In the end, for all the submerged rage of all Nambudiri women, only sixty-five men were brought to trial. Those sixty-five were indicted. That was my revenge. Was it my revenge alone?

"And now, tell me, sister. Which one do you think was worse, the man who led a woman into prostitution for his own satisfaction, or the woman who willed herself into prostitution to counter him? Which one should you hate? Which one should you shun?"

I had not uttered a word throughout her strange account, and now I was dumb- struck. She misunderstood my silence and spoke in a voice full of disappointment and despair: "Why did I come here? I made a mistake. Why did I try to speak to a slave of a woman who has no self-respect or honor? Oh no, you will never change."

I was not offended by what she said. At last I began to speak: "My poor wronged sister, I don't blame you. I do sympathize with you. I understand that you were speaking for many—for the weak against the strong, for women calling out for jus- tice, for all human beings whose emotions and instincts have been stamped upon. What you did was not just an act of personal revenge, it was a protest born out of grief and despair.

"But then, think of this, too. Was it not impulsive and headstrong to take up such a responsibility on your own? Individual effort cannot yield lasting results; some- times it can be positively dangerous. Just think of that. That storm that you raised— what good did it possibly do to society as a whole? In the end, men used it as an ex- cuse to victimize us even more; the memory of that event was a means of humiliating us, forcing us to hang our heads in shame. Remember too that you hardly brought any consolation to the families and womenfolk of the excommuni- cated men."

By this time, I too was stirred, my voice shook as I spoke. "You must excuse me. But I have to say that for most of us, what you choose to describe as the sacrifice of Tatri was nothing more and nothing less than the trial of a prostitute. True, it cre- ated a storm, but it did not point to a clear direction for us. The end cannot justify the means, sister. Of course, I applaud your courage and your pride, but I have to denounce the path you took.

"But, all the same, we as Nambudiris can never forget Tatri. From your world of darkness and silence you hurled a random firecracker as a warning and a challenge. Nevertheless it ignited a torch for us in our generation, and there will be greater fires in times to come. Your revenge will be forgiven because of those radiant future fires."

I held out my hands to her in love and compassion. But the face of the female form had paled, its eyes were lifeless, it vanished away into the morning fog, wail- ing. "I must not let my shadow fall upon you. For you I am, and always will be, a sinner, a fallen woman, a devil." The cock crowed. I woke up from that strange dream.